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Personal Reflections: Childhood Memories

by Halina Kramarz Herman

Halina Kramarz Herman was born in Warsaw, Poland, just as World War II was beginning. Her father was a physician and was killed during the war. Her mother lost her whole family, including her parents and four siblings, during the war. She lived in Krakow after the war until 1949, at which time she moved to Paris, where she spent two years, and then to Montreal. She moved to Cincinnati in 1966. Here are some recollections from her early childhood.



I have been in this little village for some time now. At first I stayed with a family who did not take good care of me, and then was switched to the present family who treat me somewhat better. I walk around barefoot most of the time, and at times I get thorns in my feet, and don't know how to take them out. Sometimes I knock on people's doors and ask for help. I have no clothes except for an old nightshirt which I wear all the time. The other day, I got spanked because I fell in the mud during a heavy rain, and got all dirty. Sometimes older kids pick on me, and because I am small, they throw me around from one person to another, and swing me just for fun, to make me feel queasy. The other day, a young German soldier who seemed very friendly was passing by, thought I was cute and picked me up. I was frightened; he had a cigarette in his hand, and without meaning it, his cigarette touched my arm as he picked me up. Even though I felt the burn, I did not utter a word, because I knew he was a German and was scared of him.

1944

I am about four or five years old. I have just recovered from typhoid fever. I was really very ill, and delirious at one point. My mother came from Krakow and brought a doctor with her to Chernichov, and when I saw him, I said, "You smell like my Daddy," meaning the antiseptic smell in my physician father's office which I vaguely recollect. This frightens my mother because she is on false papers and is supposed to be an unmarried woman with a child, and is concerned that the doctor will turn her in. She tells the doctor that I am delirious and do not know what I am saying. He is very nice, pats her on the shoulder, tells her it is all right, and refuses to charge for the visit.

1945

I am five years old. I am in Krakow, Poland, and my mother is putting me to bed. It is quite cold in the flat where we live, and my mother, anticipating some air raids, dresses me up warmly even though I am going to sleep. After she has read me a story, she tucks me in and asks in a pleading voice, "Will everything be all right, Dzidzia?" and I answer very assuredly with all the confidence of a five-year-old. "Everything will be all right, Mamusi." I am really very confident that this will be so. Sometimes at night the sirens go off and we have to go down to the basement that serves as a shelter, but I am not afraid. I know vaguely that we are being liberated. However, I remember that the other day, I became really frightened when a bomb hit the building next door. I saw the chimney and the roof collapse, and

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Glimpses from long ago: They call me Dzidzia. My real name is Halina, but nobody really calls me that. My nickname by which everyone calls me is "Dzidzia" which is an endearing, diminutive term, literally meaning "baby."



Halina (smallest child on the right) and friends dressed in the Polish national costume for a school play.

1942

I am very young, maybe two or three years old. My mother and I are sitting high up in the attic of a tall building in Zakopane, which is a resort place high up in the mountains in Poland. It is winter and there is snow all around. My mother and I are looking at some books, my very favorite thing to do, and I am supposed to be very quiet. Every time I raise my voice to say something, my

mother puts her finger to her lips and whispers: "Let's see how long we can stay very quiet." Way down outside below us, I see a group of small figures, standing out against the brilliant white of the snow that is all around. I see that they are soldiers and have rifles. They are going from house to house. My mother tells me that they are German soldiers and we need to be very quiet so they will not find us. Sort of like playing hide and seek, I think to myself.

1943

I am about three or four years old living in Chernichov, a tiny village near Krakow, with a woman and her adult daughter. None of the streets are paved. It is mostly farm country. My mother works in Krakow, and from time to time she comes to visit me. She always comes by ferry (a river runs through the village). When she comes, she always brings some things to eat, but most importantly, she brings me books. I just love books. Sometimes I sit on the steps of the church of the village, and pretend to read anything I can find. Often people tell me that I am holding a book upside down, but it doesn't matter. I just turn it right side up, and continue "reading."

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ran screaming out of the room. I also remember my mother covering windows at night so no lights could be seen from the air.

1949

I am 10 years old; my mother and I live in Krakow. I go to church every Sunday. In school, I am being taught Russian. I know Russian songs. A short while ago my mother told me that we were moving far away. This Sunday, my mother sits me down and tells me that I am not going to church. "Why?" I ask. "Because you are not really Catholic; you are Jewish." I cannot believe this. I have nothing personally against Jews, but have never identified with them, and I remember people talking against them. "It can't be," I reply. "How can I be Jewish if you are not?" "I am Jewish, too," my mother replies. A long pause on my part and then I say, "But I bet your mother was not Jewish." "Yes, she was as well," my mother answers again. And then I learn that we are going to be leaving Poland, and are going to this country called France. It is so difficult to sort all this out! Only much later do I begin to understand that my mother was so frightened by the war, that she delayed telling me that I was Jewish even after the war ended.



Halina and her mother in
Krakow after the war.

